



Feed the Future Country Fact Sheet

Online Version: <https://www.feedthefuture.gov/article/laws-land-raise-tajik-women-farmers>

Laws of the Land Raise up Tajik Women Farmers

Gulbahor Rajabova never dreamed she would one day be a land activist in her rural home town in northern Tajikistan. But, when her farm was stolen out from under her by an influential businessman, she was left with no choice.

It happened five years ago as she was leading a 50-member farmers' collective reorganized from a former Soviet Union cotton farm. One of the members used his business connections to persuade local authorities to assign half the land directly to him. The remaining 49 people, mostly women, were left with the least productive land and a \$40,000 debt.

Rajabova knew this land transaction had taken place illegally, but she had nowhere to turn. She showed the fraudulent documents to local authorities, but they refused to take action.

As she was losing hope, she met lawyer Nodira Sidykova, the director of a USAID-supported legal aid center in Spitaman, Tajikistan, who agreed to take her case. They lost two appeals before reaching the Supreme Court and winning a favorable ruling. The court ordered the businessman to return the land to Rajabova and pay \$17,000 towards the farm's debt.

"We are teaching farmers about the law and to not be afraid to go to court and protect their interests under the law," said Sidykova, who once aspired to become a judge but later realized she could make more of a difference focusing on land rights in her community.

Over the last three years, she has been part of a USAID-funded network of legal aid centers that have helped more than 100,000 farmers learn about and assert their rights. Through the support of one NGO in the network, "Rural Women," the number of registered women-led family farms in four districts increased almost threefold, from 87 to 240. Many of these gains are being expanded through the U.S. Government's flagship food security initiative, [Feed the Future](#).

The program to improve farmers' land rights put the brakes on what has become a sad rite of passage, particularly for female farmers. When farmers lack knowledge about their rights as workers on a collective farm, they are susceptible to exploitation. Farm members are paid in cotton stalks instead of cash, they don't receive the maternity or sick leave benefits they are entitled to, and they face severe intimidation if they try to leave.

Without control over their land and without a source of income, these farmers are unable to grow enough nutritious food to feed their families. In fact, according to the USAID-funded 2012 Demographic Health Survey, 12 percent of children in Tajikistan are underweight, reflecting both acute and chronic under-nutrition; 10 percent of children are wasted--indicated by an acute, rapid weight loss and low weight for height; and 4 percent are severely wasted. Twenty-six percent of children under age 5 are stunted, of whom nearly half are severely stunted. As part of Feed the Future, farmers are learning how to break their dependency on unprofitable non-food crops such as cotton and support their families while growing nutritious food instead.

Breaking with Tradition

In Tajikistan, all land is owned by the government, but after the end of the Soviet Union, land-use rights were given to small-sized private collective farms. Individuals have the right to withdraw from the state or collective farm to establish private farms, but the process is not easy.

[Continue reading this article](#) in the May/June 2013 edition of USAID FrontLines.